

PRESS RELEASE: Tuesday 5 October 2021

“Wrecking-ball act” threatens future of historic bridge

Unrest is brewing in an East Sussex village over National Highways’ plan to infill a historic railway bridge within a conservation area.

The state-owned roads company manages more than 3,100 legacy structures on the Department for Transport’s behalf. A controversial programme to infill or demolish 134 bridges and tunnels was revealed in January, but the Government called a temporary halt over the summer. Work is expected to resume in the next few weeks, with 68 structures thought to be under immediate threat.

Designed by civil engineer Frederick Banister, the bridge on Church Road, Barcombe was built in the early 1880s as part of a line connecting Lewes and East Grinstead. The Bluebell Railway now runs steam services on an 11-mile section further north and believes that “the remaining trackbed is a potentially valuable transport corridor which should be safeguarded”.

The structure carries a narrow, minor road and is assessed as having a capacity of 24 tonnes. A weight restriction prohibits vehicles over 20 tonnes from using it, helping to keep unsuitable traffic out of the village. The brick parapets and wingwalls have been subject to movement for many years, with cracks recorded as long ago as 1994. But instead of carrying out further repairs, National Highways intends to bury the Victorian feat within an estimated 1,000 tonnes of aggregate and concrete. The design has already been completed and a start date for the work is awaited.

There is anger that the scheme is being progressed under Permitted Development powers which leaves objectors without a voice and circumvents any democratic scrutiny of the historical, ecological and environmental impacts.

“The community’s views are being disregarded”, asserts Jonathan Scripps, a local campaigner and resident. “The bridge is a heritage asset - connecting us with our past - and lies within Barcombe’s conservation area which is meant to ensure that the village’s special architectural and historic character is both preserved and enhanced.

“The engineering issues with the bridge have been known about for decades, but instead of undertaking appropriate repairs, National Highways has just stood back and watched. Infilling is an unnecessary wrecking-ball act which will cost the taxpayer a fortune and fails to recognise the structure’s importance.

“The use of Permitted Development powers is clearly intended to overcome the planning challenges that would be faced if the scheme’s many detrimental impacts were evaluated against the policies adopted in the Council’s Local Plan.”

The landscape around the bridge is ecologically sensitive and the cutting to its immediate north is on the Priority Habitat Inventory for Deciduous Woodland, and includes some Ancient Woodland. A bat population has been recorded around the structure and the former trackbed beneath it serves as a wildlife corridor.

“Blocking the natural habitat system by infilling the bridge will have a damaging ecological impact”, says Hazel Fell Rayner, the local campaign organiser. “The importance of green bridges has been researched extensively over the last 25 years and is now well understood.

“Former railway routes offer unique opportunities for increased biodiversity that typically relies upon movement and connectivity with the wider landscape. The loss of Church Road bridge would sever that connectivity, forcing mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates to navigate a road crossing.

“Those responsible for this infilling scheme need to be looking holistically at the issues around the bridge, not just its engineering. The structure is a valued community asset, standing as a monument to the Victorians’ vision, courage and determination, and now plays a vital role in supporting our wildlife.”

The creation or conservation of connected habitats - or Nature Recovery Networks (NRNs) - is national and local government policy, and is supported by a number of academic bodies.

The HRE Group - an alliance of engineers, sustainable transport advocates and greenway developers - has accused National Highways of “destroying opportunities to build a better future”. It has called on Ministers to permanently halt the infilling programme and transfer the legacy structures to Great British Railways, a body being set up by the Government to oversee rail transport from 2023.

Graeme Bickerdike, a member of the Group, described the infilling of the bridge at Barcombe as “the clearest demonstration of National Highways’ indifference for its broader social responsibilities. The company is a threat to the railway’s valuable infrastructure heritage, blights landscapes and rides roughshod over community aspirations.”

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Attachments

BarcombeProtest©TheHREGroup: A community campaign against National Highways’ proposed plan for the bridge is launched today.

BarcombeCommunity©TheHREGroup: Locals gather beneath the bridge to discuss their strategy to combat the infill scheme.

BarcombeDefects©TheHREGroup: Fractures have been recorded in the bridge parapets and wingwalls since 1994.

BarcombeCyclists©TheHREGroup: Two cyclists pass over the bridge which has a weight restriction of 20 tonnes.

(Higher resolution versions of the above photographs are available on request)

SupportingDocuments(PDF): Correspondence/emails exchanged between National Highways and Lewes District Council's planning team, an extract from NH's 2013 structural assessment, and mapping demonstrating the extent of Barcombe's conservation area and the woodland status of the former railway trackbed north of the bridge.

To link to a video report about the campaign or embed it on your webpage:

(Link) https://youtu.be/i_JUNXUPkFQ

(Embed) `<iframe width="560" height="315" src="https://www.youtube.com/embed/i_JUNXUPkFQ" title="YouTube video player" frameborder="0" allow="accelerometer; autoplay; clipboard-write; encrypted-media; gyroscope; picture-in-picture" allowfullscreen></iframe>`

Contact details

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Facebook: [@theHREgroup](https://www.facebook.com/theHREgroup)

Notes for editors

The Historical Railways Estate (HRE) is owned by the Department for Transport (DfT) and managed on its behalf by National Highways (NH). NH is responsible for inspecting, maintaining and limiting the liability associated with around 3,100 disused railway bridges, abutments, tunnels, culverts and viaducts.

Although transport policy is largely a matter for the devolved administrations, around 19% of the HRE structures are in Scotland and 11% in Wales. These remain under HE's management.

National Highways operates under a Protocol Agreement with the Department for Transport which sets out its obligations in relation to the safety, inspection, maintenance, disposal of the structures, the maximisation of rental income and reduction of risk. Its remit was formerly fulfilled by BRB (Residuary) until its abolition on 30 September 2013.

In 2020, National Highways awarded framework contracts to six companies for works on HRE structures valued at £254M over seven years. It also agreed a professional services contract with Jacobs, worth £31.9M over ten years, and two contracts for inspections/examinations with a value of £18M over ten years.

The 134 structures at risk of demolition or infilling are located in East Anglia (12), East Midlands (4), London and the Home Counties (8), Northern England (16), Northern Scotland

(8), North-West England (3), South-East England (11), Central/Southern Scotland (19), South-West England (24), Wales (5), West Midlands (16) and Yorkshire & Lincolnshire (8).

A map showing the broader threat to HRE structures - including those that have failed assessments - is available via this link...

https://www.google.com/maps/d/u/0/edit?mid=1LVvKXUS_a66LGzG8mPNLZaRpz2hw3ioe

The HRE Group is an alliance of walking, cycling and heritage campaigners, engineers and greenway developers who regard the Historical Railways Estate's structures to be strategically valuable in the context of future rail and active travel provision.

The following local authorities have told National Highways that planning permission is required for their infilling schemes: Aberdeenshire, Angus, Cheshire West & Chester, Essex, Glasgow, Gloucestershire, Herefordshire, Hertfordshire, Leicestershire, North Ayrshire, North Yorkshire, Northumberland, Perth & Kinross, Powys, Shropshire and Stratford-upon-Avon. Others have raised objections or imposed specific constraints.